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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 001237

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SUBJECT: TURKISH-IRANIAN ETHNIC OPPPOSITION GROUPS UNDER PRESSURE, ACCORDING TO IRANIAN-TURKISH ACADEMIC

REF: 07 ANKARA 1577

Classified By: Political Counselor Daniel O'Grady, reasons 1.4 b,d

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. The Iranian regime is suppressing Azeri-Iranian (Turkish) ethnic opposition groups in Iran, leading those groups to become more militant and espouse armed struggle, according to Center for Eurasian and Strategic Studies (ASAM) Middle East Expert Arif Keskin (protect). Ethnic nationalism throughout Iran has expanded beyond the regime's capacity to control. At the same time, Persian, pro-Shah and People's Mujahadeen opposition groups are advocating a vision for a democratic Iran that does not take into account the country's ethnic diversity. PJAK, Keskin claims, is a PKK subsidiary, manufactured by Iran to bolster ties with Turkey and weaken Azeri demographic and political strength. Azeri-Iranian opposition groups in Turkey fear a perceived rapprochement between Turkey and Iran, and have lowered their profile. According to Keskin, Turkey has no policy to quash "South Azerbaijani" political activism, no matter what they may fear. END SUMMARY.

AZERI-IRANIANS UNDER PRESSURE

¶2. (C) The Iranian regime is "mercilessly" suppressing ethnic opposition groups in Iran, particularly in Azeri regions, Arif Keskin told us June 23. Keskin, who recently became a Turkish citizen (he is an Iranian-Turkish dual national of Azerbaijani ethnicity), described property confiscation and political murders at the hands of Iran's Revolutionary Guards. As a result, he reports, the Azeri-Iranian political opposition is becoming militant; a serious debate about launching an armed struggle is underway among its leaders.

¶3. (C) The balance has changed since last year (reftel), according to Keskin. Whereas the regime had previously exploited ethnic nationalism in order to divide its political opponents, ethnic nationalism has now expanded beyond the regime's security capacity, emerging as its primary security concern. He noted that discussion of ethnic issues was off the agenda during recent parliamentary elections. The situation is not at a breaking point, but there has been a major linguistic shift away from Farsi and toward Turkish in all aspects of daily life in Azeri-Iranian regions; all the satellite dishes there are pointed at Turkey. This ethnic nationalist trend is found among other Iranian ethnic groups, and the regime is reportedly nervous.

¶4. (C) Unfortunately, according to Keskin, the Iranian regime's opponents are divided. Pro-Shah groups and the People's Mujahadeen are fundamentally Persian-nationalist, he

said. Shah supporters admire Turkey's Western orientation and secular structure, but disdain Turkish culture and resent Turkey's recent economic success. The People's Mujahadeen claims to promote democracy, but its views on ethnicity, women's and minority rights is unclear. The People's Mujahadeen, according to Keskin, is, along with PKK/PJAK, targeted by Turkey-Iran intelligence sharing and cooperation, forcing its activities in Turkey and presence in Istanbul to decline greatly. Six years ago, he estimated, you could easily access their representatives in Turkey; today it is very difficult. The Iranian opposition, especially in Tehran, Keskin stressed, must become more pluralistic to prevent the country's disintegration.

PJAK: A PRODUCT OF THE IRANIAN STATE

¶15. (C) PJAK is "a product of the Iranian state," according to Keskin, designed to allow the regime to militarize Kurdish regions and sow fear amongst the Kurdish people; it does not constitute a serious threat to the regime at this time. Anti-PJAK operations also allow Iran to further pressure the Iraqi government and to create a basis for strengthening strategic partnership with Turkey. "The regime kills ethnic Kurdish leaders and then distributes Abdullah Ocalan books among the people," said Keskin. PJAK militants, he maintained, can move freely among Iranian-Kurdish villages, while evidence of collaboration between PJAK and the regime is suppressed. Turkey, he said, is what binds PJAK and the PKK. PKK is the parent organization; the two have a "unity of vision." The organizations share senior level officials

ANKARA 00001237 002 OF 003

and PKK handles PJAK's propaganda operations and provides its security. Keskin believes that if the PKK is defeated in Turkey and northern Iraq, PJAK can allow the PKK to sustain its conflict against Turkey. (COMMENT: A more detailed analysis from Keskin on PJAK and Iranian Kurds can be found, in English translation, at the Turkish Center for International Relations and Strategic Analysis (TURKSAM) website: www.turksam.org/en/a210. END COMMENT.)

¶16. (C) PJAK supporters have helped advance proposals in Tehran to create a majority-Kurdish province in western Iran out of West Azerbaijan province, Keskin told us. Kurds number 700,000 in this province of 2.5 million, but most are recent arrivals. Tehran had accepted this proposal, which even reformists had endorsed, but conservative mullahs, fearful of creating a majority-Sunni province, rejected the idea, he said. Warmer bilateral relations between Turkey and Iran have also lessened the urgency of creating a "buffer zone" between Azeri-Iranian regions and Turkey, though state tension over this issue remains high. He pointed out that since 1906, when Iran had four provinces and the largest was Azeri, Azeri regions have been divided into nine provinces (seven majority-Azeri) and increasingly Kurdified.

AZERI-IRANIANS LOOK WARILY TO TURKEY

¶17. (C) Azeri-Iranians' approach to Turkey has started changing. There is growing apprehension about warmer Turkey-Iran relations, but Keskin believes these concerns are exaggerated. The only limits to "South Azerbaijani" opposition activism in Turkey are: no armed conflict and don't agitate too loudly; modest protest demonstrations have been authorized. Nonetheless, Azeri-Iranians have not been able to overcome their fear of a Turkey-Iran rapprochement and have become "passive," he said. Keskin noted that, even before he became a Turkish citizen, he detected no policy to interfere with his activities. He often has to convince his Azeri-Iranians contacts in Iran that they will not be arrested when they travel to Turkey. (Iranian tourists can travel to Turkey visa-free.)

¶18. (C) The Iranian regime is aware that Turkey is the

country with the biggest potential to exploit Iran's ethnic divisions; Iranian intelligence is highly focused on Turkish—"South Azerbaijani" relations, said Keskin. Turkey wishes to avoid instability in Iran and has thus far not sought to organize the "South Azerbaijani" opposition. But the historical divide between Turks and Azeri-Iranians is breaking down. Whereas Azeri-Iranians primarily saw themselves as Shiite, today their identity is largely secular and culturally Turkish. At the same time, he contended that the Iranian people as a whole admire the United States. He argued that if "Persian-nationalist" opposition groups can seek to better accommodate and collaborate with Iran's restive ethnic groups, then a secular democratic transition be achieved in Iran. Turkey, he posited, would benefit from such an Iran -- more influential on the world stage and with normalized relations with the United States. Azeri groups, he recalled, have been at the vanguard of every major turning point in Iranian history, include 1979, only to be pushed back to the periphery. This time, Keskin believes, Iranian-Azeris will need to maintain a central role in any democratic future for Iran.

COMMENT

¶9. (C) Keskin's claim that Azeri-Iranians are wary of a perceived Turkey-Iran rapprochement might explain why "South Azerbaijani" activists keep such a low profile in Turkey. (Keskin had also noted to us earlier that Iranian intelligence monitors their activities closely.) While Azeri-Iranian issues have not garnered significant popular attention here, Keskin's views have helped shape a widespread Turkish belief that Turkey has a lever to pull against Iran if Turkish interests were ever violated. ASAM, where he serves as an expert, is one of Turkey's leading foreign policy think tanks, with strong nationalist credentials. It is headed by a former Turkish Ambassador to the United States. Keskin, who is one of the few ASAM experts permitted to write for outside publication, and who appears on TV frequently, seems to have a wide audience and strong contacts within Turkey's Iranian refugee community. While his

ANKARA 00001237 003 OF 003

understanding of the dynamics within the Iranian opposition and of PJAK is not wholly consistent with our own, we will remain in contact with him and seek opportunities to gain additional perspectives from others on these issues, including Azeri-Iranians and their relationship to Turkey.

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